



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

COUNTRY GODS

BY STARK YOUNG

THE *fiesta* of San Pancrazio lasted through two days because of the saint's hospitality. Saint Peter was his guest for the festival; coming from his own home down the hill where the road turns off into the country, just as San Pancrazio himself had come from his home under the mountain looking down over the water. The crowd for the parade on the second night was innumerable, for the whole town was out and all the countryside for miles. The Taormina band was present by order of the Sindaco, in three-cornered hats and feathers; and the Syracuse band with cockades had come. San Pancrazio and San Pietro had to travel from the Church of the Virgin far down at the west end of the town, to make a visit to the Duomo; though, like the sly pieties they were, they had really been there up to that moment already, the whole two days in fact, getting presents and offerings and having their pictures sold. From the Virgin's church they were to go the entire length of the Corso to their homes outside the walls. Everyone made his best showing that night, the gentlemen in their Palermo tailoring, the ladies with all their jewels on; the workmen in brighter jackets and sashes; the contadini, some of the men in old knee breeches or boots and caps three centuries back in style, and the women in shawls with long ear-rings reaching to their shoulders and full skirts like hoops.

Booths and barrows lined the streets, selling fireworks and drinks, *torrone* made of new almonds and honey, knives, and ribbons; and alternating with the merchandise and drinks were the gambling stands. There were a dozen roulette tables, silver horses whirling around over the numbered courses where you put your *soldo*, and bright arrows with painted feathers that stopped whirling sooner or later and left a light tip resting on the lucky number. Crowds of people were putting their

money down, mostly little boys it seemed. The rockets were firing from every direction, brilliant, scattering far up overhead, with reports like bombs, unbelievably loud, to appease the Sicilian liking for mere noise. Now and then firecrackers in bunches were thrown from the roofs of the churches into the little stone streets, with a rattling and detonation like a bombardment. Beside the Duomo the band from Syracuse was playing airs from the operas. Meantime the deep blue of the early night had fallen over the walls, and over the country dropping down toward the sea and rising on the other hand toward the Saracen castle above the town. A few pale stars were out and a slender moon, almost past, was shining. The whole piazza was sweet with the perfume of the jessamine that ran along the front of the house next the church, incredible sweetness in that soft, blue air. And everywhere were the voices, deep and bright.

Presently the other band was heard coming nearer; the Syracusan made a final flourish and left off. Lights appeared through the archway beneath the clock; then more distinctly a golden canopy and lamps burning about a figure, gilded and painted all over, with a high, jewelled crown on his head. The round dome was like that of an Indian rajah set on twisted columns, rococco with heavy grapes that twined over them. Under it Saint Peter sat. He was covered with rings and watches and chains that blazed in the light of his flaring and somewhat gaudy lamps. After him, and carried also on twenty or thirty shoulders, came San Pancrazio himself in a finer and larger tabernacle, rectangular, with more lamps and more brocade and jewelry and presents. He appeared to be completely entangled in chains, coral drops, bracelets, rings and pins, and strings of five lire notes that hung down from his wrists. The patron saint of the town San Pancrazio was; and though he had to be painted black because he had come from Africa, you see, Signore, fifteen centuries ago, and was very ugly with that great staring head and thick mouth, what blessings he had shown Taormina and favors in Paradise! Indeed, Signore, who does not know the time he saved the town from fever, when the sacristan saw his eyes move, up of course, where heaven is.

With the saint came the nuns, carrying long tapers and Our Lady's banner, sky blue, and bound with wreaths of flowers. And the little communicants with their white gauze veils and their white bouquets and white candles followed after, great-eyed little girls with their crackling white, exactly like icing figures from a cake. They too had banners; and the priests, the students, everyone, had standards and streamers and banners, red, orange, blue, white, with gold and silver fringes flashing in the light of the candles and tapers, the torches and the flaring acetylene lanterns on those green arches across the street. Everyone was laughing and talking. The little boys at the roulette wheels laughed and cursed and banged their money down; and the Syracuse band set up again with a medley from *Carmen*, all under this night of jasmine perfume and blue air.

Later we saw the saint's homecoming, after he had made a visit in Saint Peter's church. They set him in his shrine in the dark, bare little church with all his lamps about him. The church roared with laughter and shouts: "Addio, Santo!" "Goodbye!" "Remember us!" "Don't forget Taormina!" People ran up and played a sort of tag with the saint, touching his robe and jumping away; and cracked jokes and whistled at him. And he meanwhile sat glittering there, looking out over their heads with his big eyes and his black, ugly face, blessing them with that enormous uplifted hand and doing them a great deal of good, as everybody knew. And then the lamps were put out, with everyone departing, and the door closed, and only the little devoted tapers were left to burn that night at his feet till they were ended.

My friend who had seen it all with me followed me to my balcony.

"Well?" I said.

"Well?" he said.

He was from Philadelphia, a gentle fellow with an odd mixture of convictions and a readiness to agree to many added points-of-view, once you reminded him of them.

"Well, what do you think of it?" I asked.

"Well, it's very picturesque of course, as paganism—"

"Pretty piece of paganism, as Wordsworth said of *Endymion*?"

"But of course—you would hardly call this sort of thing religion."

I asked what he would call religion, knowing perfectly well what his answer would be.

"Obviously, something that comes from within. A conception of God that is from one's own inner consciousness. And worshipped in prayer and silence after long, deep, serious thinking."

"I wonder," I said, temptingly, "if length of time and seriousness have much to do with the power or importance of thought. Though it might comfort us Northerners to think so. Let's make epigrams. In the infinite all things are equal. That might not do. Mud as well as depth hides the bottom."

"Be serious," he pleaded.

"Not even processions, then?" I asked.

"At least not such a hullabaloo. And not the bullfighter's song for a religious occasion!"

"But they like it," I said.

"And the gambling? I suppose they like that too. Even the little boys."

"The Latin mania for chance."

"And all this saint business. I'daressay they have his bones."

"Undoubtedly. But they like it."

"Like it, like it, damn it, what's that got to do with it?"

"But people's religion is not ready-made," I insisted; "whatever they are their religion must be. Big or little, contemplative, dim or open, objective. If you admit that, then—"

"But I don't admit it. Otherwise how should we ever know which religion is—"

"The true one? Ah—" I stopped. If my friend was going to bring Philadelphia to church on the east coast of Sicily—if we were to breathe the pews upon this race made up of Greek and Roman and Saracen, Spanish and African blood, dwelling in the open reality of this bright sun, this changing verdure and drouth and rocks, this shadow of Etna over all to set down life and death as certainties beyond any possible illusion—and to be so massive after such a festival—I stood there wondering just what I might say. And then suddenly came a crash of

bells, brazen, barbaric, happy. I heard them and remembered how many things are in heaven and earth. My friend's was the regular Protestant standpoint, which removes the ground of all things to the mind, to set up bounds and altars there. I looked at his face, an honest, dry, troubled, intelligent face it was, full of character and will, energy, inhibited impulses, and confusion. I might as well let him alone with this God of his behind the clouds or behind the stove or wherever that inner eye might see him. Better there, perhaps; more suited to my friend's state. I would make no argument. I merely remarked on the throaty, bright roar of the bells, and how different they were from the bells in England and Philadelphia, which were sweeter and more pealing and sentimental.

He had not thought of that, he said; it seemed rather true, he thought; and went indoors to bed.

But he was a good fellow, I stood there reflecting, travelling here alone in Europe with his serious and thirsty heart. And he was tied to all this Sicilian thing by far gentler thoughts than he ever knew or was able to express.

I thought of these people in the streets, what they were. Their voices flared up and down, they laughed, burst into song, were grave again; they met and kissed each other, they talked gravely, they made scufflings and fisticuffs; these sudden shocks of life and vividness struck and seemed to pass through them. The forces of life seemed to move through them as the wind moves through trees. Even their bodies and their faces have a distinctness as if shaped by the struggle of growing forces; as the trees and plant forms are distinct about them, shaped by the struggling of water and wind and sun and the earth. I recalled a little girl that I had seen. Her body was straight, and she walked smoothly as a cat; her shock of sunburnt, harsh hair, her smooth, dark skin, and black, tragic, wild eyes, belonged to the land, the rocks, the dust, the sun; her little feet seemed to grow out of the earth. And all around her were faces, characters, with the life of the earth written on them. How easy it is here to understand the way in which Mediterranean art, literature, sculpture and masks ran so constantly to general symbols, and to types, to the larger simplicities of nature, within which her

subtleties are written. Not that there seems really more of life and nature here than in the North; but that it seems more distinct. We get the sense of life carrying these beings along and then later wearing them out, consuming them with what they had been nourished by.

Nature seems to be tested here. This seems to be about what Nature intended; and only afterward arose all those complicated organisms we call civilized. I feel that here I can see things in a matrix of Nature. And that accounts for the impression I get of passion in these people, but of little sentiment. I get the impression of brutality sometimes, of a violent animalism, but never of vulgarity: vulgarity is more confused and more involved with society than with a deeper natural current. These people seem not hard so much as natural. Their step when they walk is as free as a horse's; they have clear, able minds, unfuddled with cant and introspection. They cry and laugh, but they do not brood very much. Their fingers are apt and quick; they are generous with gifts, and make hard bargains; they have pity in their hearts but not so much in their souls; their pity is quick, human, but not long and troubled and profound. Their tragedy is hard and clear and violent, fatal, but not depressing. They accept fate, they shrug their shoulders; one does as one must. What would you have? What does the proverb say? Necessity makes the old woman run. They must have noises about them to equal the brightness of the light. They can sleep, like birds and animals, through any noise, songs, drums, carts on stone, donkeys and church bells; and anywhere, in a doorway, by a wall, under a roadside tree.

And I think of these people as tied to the earth by the bread they eat. That old figure of speech, the staff of life, here goes back to its first reality; for a piece of bread is enough and often is all they have. I see bread, bread; children stand in doorways eating bread; and old men sit down at a wine table or by a wall and take out a piece of bread to eat. The poetry of bread is theirs, Ceres, Demeter, the mother Earth. They are the earth's children and lean on her breast. What other kind of gods and saints and festivals could they have? What gods but bright gods and human gods, able to make bargains; gods who are

social. For if one wishes to give San Pancrazio a watch or a five lire note and rings and gold chains, the saint himself must be obliging; he must show us favors and come to his *festa* when there are parades and rockets and roulette and drinks and music and candles. And if a man loves these blessed ones in Paradise, the good God and Madonna and her Son, and afterward the saints, San Pancrazio and Peter, San Giovannino and the rest—who were human themselves once, we can tell you, and now live with God, though they like to have their shrines on earth and crowns and *festas*—if one loves these rightly here in Taormina, one will be a good man. A good man is a man who, after God and the saints, loves his family and is happy with them; who likes to see other people and laugh and talk with them, even if he gets angry sometimes, though it is not so bad as in Girgenti, where a man will kill you for a snap of the finger; who marries early, drinks a little wine, works hard, goes to mass, pays his dues, and finally grows old with fine sons and daughters and plenty of grandchildren to come to see him in the donkey carts, with old Maria or Annunziata his wife sitting outside by the door with him, two white heads, not many teeth any more; and now and then a visit from the padre, to whom it is best to leave a little something in the will; and finally a proper burial. That was a good man, people will say of you then.

I looked at the night about me. There had been an early moon setting in the west and now there was only starlight. It was long past twelve, past one; but I could see an old man and all his family sitting out in front of their house talking gaily together, and the carts were just beginning to go home. They came by one after another rattling on the stones of the road. In every cart they sang; strange, bright voices echoing along the rocks and down the walled roads. One after another I heard these songs, none of them more than three lines, sung over and over again, sometimes in two voices, sometimes a sort of counter-singing of four, and often a whole chorus, those in the cart and those walking alongside down the starlit road. *A mezzanotte il marinaio—*

At midnight the mariner
After long labor, at his door
Arrives.

Then a pause and some talk and laughter, and then—

At midnight the mariner
After long labor, at his door
Arrives,—

like the singers in Greek poetry with their short, ancient songs. Meantime from everywhere, in the grass and the trees, the cicadas kept up their music, thinly metallic, a little brazen, dry, like a voice from the garden drouth. Far down you could hear the surge on the long, curving shore, low, constantly repeating itself, exactly the same sound as the wind in the pine trees. One voice was repeated that existed in the water, on the shore and in the pines above it. The same life was in the earth and the water. The sickle of the moon that had been in the west, the stars, the rocks, the country, and the voices of the people going by, and their simple, clear gods, made all a unity together.

This same country now was silver and blue and dusk; but by day, I stood thinking, it was flooded with incredible light. Then there was a glare over everything, under a cloudless sky. The stone vases on the wall that climbed the hill to the convent mingled their blue shadows with the shadows of the cypresses falling across the white road. The shadows of the olive branches were sifted down over the bare ground, the vista of olive trees above the gray earth was melancholy and wistful. The sun flickered on the eucalyptus leaves; the red pomegranates hung above the walls and the lemons against thick green. And far below in that ineffable, sad light, ran the gentle shore, with clumps of oleanders, and water, violet, blue, and emerald.

And now the voices at last died down; they sank as the stars fade or the wind passes. It seemed only natural that songs too should end. A wind that came before the dawn began to stir. And then presently far down the hill more faintly one song again, in a chorus of voices. And then I heard the singing die away again, and the surge return on the shore.

STARK YOUNG.